

**Opening Statement  
Chairman Mark Souder**

**“National Parks of Florida”**

**Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,  
and Human Resources  
Committee on Government Reform**

**January 11, 2006**

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us today. This is the eighth in a series of hearings focusing on the critical issues facing the National Park Service. I would like to welcome the Members of Congress who have joined us today, and who care deeply about the National Parks.

This hearing will focus on the Parks of Florida. Each year, millions of Americans visit the state of Florida; millions more live here. Many of these people visit any of the ten National Park Service units located here. These sites are historic, cultural, and natural; all make unique contributions to the Park Service.

Florida is the home of the first permanent European settlement in the continental United States. This story is preserved at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine.

Perhaps the best known of Florida's units is Everglades National Park. This park protects unique ecosystems, endangered species, and water quality in South Florida. Importantly, the Everglades are in a state of renewal and restoration. This restoration has been controversial and expensive, but can teach us much about preservation, environmental impairment, and restoration.

A critical part of the parks of South Florida is environmental preservation. Of particular importance is the conservation of unique coral formations. These reefs provide homes not only to unique wildlife, but also support human existence through water purification and protection from the ocean's fury.

The National Park Service is facing many challenges and problems. Management and funding are of constant concern to all park units. Underneath these issues are problems special to each park unit. In Florida, environmental degradation is of particular concern.

As we have seen frequently over the last few years, Florida sits directly in path of hurricanes. These storms disrupt the day to day living of Florida's citizens and the balance of nature. Although hurricanes are themselves natural phenomena, they can and

do destroy nature's delicate balance. They also damage park service assets which conserve the ecology of Florida and facilitate visits to these exceptional areas. Restoration and rehabilitation of park facilities in the face of recurring hurricanes is certainly a daunting task that will not end, but perhaps can be improved as we learn more about nature and hurricanes.

I would like to welcome Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen to this hearing. Although not a Member of this Subcommittee, she is a Member of the full Government Reform Committee. Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen is a strong advocate for Florida and for the National Parks.

On our first panel, I would like to welcome Sherri Fields, Chief of the Natural Resources Division of the Southeast Region of the National Park Service. She will be joined during the question time by Superintendents Karen Gustin of Big Cypress National Preserve, Dan Kimball from Everglades National Park, and Mark Lewis from Biscayne National Park.

Our second panel will be Nathaniel Reed with the National Park Conservation Association; also, Dexter Lehtinen with the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force. Welcome to all of you.